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Between “theological correctness” and everyday life: contemporary Paganism as lived religion

One of features that should characterize a good Catholic is a specific, faith-based attitude towards birth-control methods. So – in theory – when issues of procreation and sexual life ethics are taken into consideration, Catholics should abstain from using various methods of contraception. Poland is a Catholic country, since around 88% of the population declare themselves as Catholics, according to 2011 census. At the same time the country is struggling with a demographic crisis – the low number of child births – and the newly elected government denoted supporting families and raising the number of new-born children, as one of priority goals of their politics. If a simple, syllogistic thinking was to be applied to that situation, it would lead to a statement, that Poland is one of the most asexual countries in the world: Poles are predominantly Catholics, they do not use contraception and there is a low number of child births, ergo they use the most efficient way of contraception, which is sexual abstinence.

However, if we look at sociological research, this phenomenon becomes more understandable, as most of Poles do use contraception methods and attitudes towards birth control vary in the Catholic population. One of the well-recognized sociologists of religion in Poland and a Catholic priest, prof. Janusz Mariański with his team from the Catholic University of Lublin

in 2002-2005 performed a study on the large group of youth (2505 respondents, average age 17-18) and their family values. 81% of the group declared as believers, of which 96% were Catholics. When questioned about the usage of contraception, 59.2 % of respondents labelled the practice as “permitted” and 24.6% as “it depends”. Only 10.9% declared that using contraception is non-permitted behavior (Mariański, 2009, p. 72). If asked about premarital sexual life, again 50.2% said that it is permitted and 28% said it depends¹. Again, if a simple logic was to be applied, it could be said, that young Poles are no good at being good Catholics. Mariański concluded that “Church sexual morality is not only ignored in practice, but also theoretically questioned (...) on the specific moral issues, young Poles (in the vast majority of them being Catholic) declare opinions and views that are difficult to reconcile with the Catholic religion (...) it is becoming a megatrend among young people” (Mariański, 2009, pp. 74-75).

These inconsistencies are vividly observable, especially when from the outside. There are two interesting studies done by the sociologist Ziad Abou Saleh in Poland (1997, 2015). The first study, focused on perception of Poles, was conducted in 1994 and included 610 respondents – 64% of all Arab students in Poland that time. Respondents were coming from different countries, namely: Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Yemen, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia, Sudan, Syria, and Arab Emirates. The most represented (192) group in the sample were Syrians. The second research, conducted in 2015, included 132 respondents from the original sample, of which 72 were residing in Poland and 60 in the countries of origin. In 1994, respondents contested almost unanimously (over 97%) the following traits of Polish culture: lack of respect for the elderly, lack of strong family ties, low authority of a father/husband. In 2015, the criticism was voiced less frequently (15% less in the first two categories), and 39% in the third category. The “exposed emancipation” of women has been contested in 1994 by 80% of respondents and “unlimited sexual

¹ There were differences in a sub-group of people who declared themselves as „systematic practitioners”, and for the pre-marital sex 37,% of them named it as permitted and 33,6% as „it depends” (Mariański, 2009, p. 73).

freedom” by 70% of respondents. In 2015, the criticism of above characteristics has been less frequent, shared by respectively 20% and 30%. At the same time, the disapproval towards Poles has increased very sharply within two categories: not following the principles of the Roman Catholic religion in their lives (from 58% to 81%) and having few children in their family (from 58% to 97%). Results point to the fact that acceptance of Polish cultural values occurred during 20 years, in the matter of gender roles in family, but, on the other hand, the lack of approval increased as far as the size of a family and implementation of religious (Roman Catholic) principles in Poles’ daily lives are concerned.

In the eyes of Saleh’s respondents there may be much hypocrisy going on in Poland, and it could be interpreted that this hypocritical persuasions and behavior are somewhat a part of a Polish mind-set, that is many Poles are seemingly deceiving themselves, maybe being afraid to admit that they are not following their beliefs. However, it can be identified with (instead of hypocrisy) a way of living one’s religion.

This is not only the single case of Poland. If we move around the World, even changing continents, we can observe more examples. In Thailand many practices performed in Buddhist temples are of magical character: they are done in order to “neutralize, improve (T. *gae*, แก่) or magically unlock (T. *sado*, สะเดาะ) people’s kamma (T. *gam*, กรรม), bad luck (T. *khro*, เคราะห์) or bad-luck-kamma (T. *khrogam*, เคราะห์กรรม) rather than interact with intentional agents” (Hubina 2017, in print). These practices may have little consistency with the Buddhist doctrine (or the doctrine people should believe in), when the law of karma is taken into consideration (especially the inevitability character of karma and its ethical nature²). But for some reasons they are performed, seemed as meaningful, and – last but not least – popular. Incompetence or hypocrisy? Again, we would say that there are people, just living their religion.

² As Hubina (2017) points out: “The term “*khrogam*” reveals that despite scholars’ emphasis on the “ethical”, law-like nature of kamma, its popular representation has merged seamlessly with the concepts of amoral powers affecting peoples’ lives.”

Theological correctness versus everyday life

In cognitive studies of religion the notion of „theological correctness” was introduced by Justin Barret to describe multiple levels of one’s understanding of religious ideas. The level of theological correctness is applied in the understanding of theological concepts and complex ideas, while basic religious concepts are grounded in intuitive and concrete knowledge (Barret, 1999, p. 327). There is a level of theological correctness and a level of lived religion, or – metaphorically speaking – the way of *legomena* and *dromena*. The *legomena* would be the recipe for believing and behaving, and the *dromena* would be the outcomes of applying this recipe in a laboratory called life. When it comes to the latter “theological concepts are simplified for processing when needed” (Barret, 1999, p. 329).

Some researchers point at the necessity of studying this lived version of religion, and there are a few good reasons to do that. The study of lived religion was often rejected as a subject worth attention or discriminated, which has its reflection in language, so some practices and beliefs were labelled as superstitious, not-truly-religious, especially by religious officials. The first good reason is that of numbers – simply the followers of lived religion form the vast majority of believers. And these are the stubborn ones. No matter how many times the religious officials lecture about the nature of the Trinity, the Law of Karma or the Will of God, people tend to “interpret” their teachings in their own way, which usually ends with leaving bread and butter by the fireplace to satisfy spirits/gods/God, and therefore efface bad karma or to book oneself a nice place in paradise. The second reason is that by studying lived religion we may observe social changes (and in which ways religion does or does not follow the global changes; e.g. in Europe it seems to be losing the battle in the field of divorces and birth-control) and bring forward studies that are closely related to people and their lives. Also, we can observe psychological processes of belief, examine more closely how meaning is formed and how human psyche can not only absorb contradictory cognitive content, but actually live (and in many cases, live successfully) according to these contradictory rules.

One of the editors of this book is trained in psychology of religion, and from his observation comes a reflection that people may be totally resistant to what is defined in psychology as cognitive dissonance, especially when religious convictions are taken into consideration. It is the reflective and wicked mind of an academic who can name and numerate these inconsistencies in both belief and behavior. The nature of cognitive dissonance is that it must be resolved quickly in order to maintain psychic balance and a basic cognitive ability to acquire new data. And it is often a matter of seconds when one's mind finds a perfect explanation for a contradictory situations, and that is what lived religion can be about. It is a way of bridging ideas and ideals of religious orthodoxy into the practical matters of everyday life.

Lived religion as a methodological approach

The lived religion as the methodological framework for the study of beliefs and practices has been gaining more and more recognition in recent decades, especially in anthropology. One of the first and most important books explicitly dealing with lived religion is the collection of essays entitled *Lived religion in America. Toward the History of Practice* from 1997, edited by David Hall. It continues the French tradition of the sociology of the religion and the study of *la religion vécue*. Studies of the lived religion, according to Hall, are inseparable from studying the context and content, as the sociological context becomes less important the cultural and ethnographical ones throughout the book (1997, p. vii). In the most broad view, the approach of lived religion encompasses everything people do with religion: what they believe in and how they express it, which rituals they perform (both publicly and privately), what everyday spiritual experiences they go through, how do they celebrate family *rites de passage*, that is wedding, funerals et cetera. Official practices, prescribed by various churches, provide the same gravity of importance as individual reinterpretations of such practices (some already given examples serve as a perfect portrayal) – and so do personally invented religious practices. As long as something spiritual and/or religious

is of matter for a certain individual, scholars focused on lived religion will be more than willing to study it.

In not-so-short history of this approach, another important book must be named: *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith And Community In Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* by Robert Anthony Orsi in 1985. For years Orsi has studied the community of Italian Harlem, especially the *festa* of the title Madonna of the 115th Street, a major procession conducted annually in the middle of July. His aim was to present an account not only of the *festa* itself, a “very complex religious drama”, but also its participants. “The celebration cannot be understood apart from an understanding of the lives of the people who took part in it”, explains Orsi in the very first words of the introduction (1985, p. xiii). Thus, he addressed the participants and held dozens of interviews – all to understand what religion means to them, religion in two ways of understanding: firstly, all the ritual practices, symbols, prayers and beliefs and secondly, religion as the totality of people’s life values, religion as all the things which matter. In another work of his, Orsi notes that the study of lived religion allows to understand how creative people are and how much importance their personal experiences convey. Furthermore, according to Orsi, “fundamental to the study of lived religion is the idea that all cultural idioms are intersubjective, including and especially religious ones” (2003, p. 173). This intersubjectivity concerns not only the nature of individual, social, cultural, and religious identities, but also the actual research on religion itself. The utmost contribution of the lived religion as an approach, he concludes, is the “to encounter and engage religious practice and imagination within the circumstances of people’s lives” (2003, p. 174).

Among numerous researchers who have chosen this very approach, the perspective of aforementioned Meredith McGuire seems to be particularly interesting. McGuire calls for study of religion on the most individual level, treating it as an “ever-changing, multifaceted, often messy – even contradictory – amalgam of beliefs and practices” (2009, p. 4). In course of her longitudinal studies, McGuire had the opportunity to analyze a great amount of individual narrations, mostly of Christians representing various American denominations. She does not consider those narrations to

be simply microcosms, reproducing in detail all that happens on the 'macro' level – namely, the religious organizations. It leaves no doubt that the individual believers can follow the guidelines of various churches or organizations to which they belong very strictly, yet they can also creatively adapt other practices, even those culturally or historically distant (for example, a devout Methodist who considers his Buddhism-inspired morning meditation as a serious spiritual task to be fulfilled on the daily basis). What is more, the individuals can surpass different stages in their lives, changing attitudes and transforming from orthodox views to more eclectic ones and vice versa. "At the level of the individual, religion is not fixed, unitary, or even coherent", notes McGuire (2009, p. 12), and the practices which matter and bring meaning to the life of a certain person may grow, change and adapt to a new environment. Therefore, in *Lived Religion. Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* McGuire reconstructs all the experiences of those people, whose religious lives she had the chance to observe – including Latinos in Texas or an Appalachian congregation of Primitive Baptists. She describes their festivals, domestic shrines or certain objects with religious meaning (like *milagros*, literally "miracles", small depictions of the body or its part which needs healing or help, used by Mexican Americans). She observes lived religion – or, as she sometimes puts it, "religion-as-lived" – in many aspects, including the relationship of religions, health and gender, embodied practices or creating one's identity, using religion as a base.

Meredith McGuire applies the term "lived religion" (or "religion-as-lived") as an useful one to differ the actual experiences of religious persons from the practices, prescribed by the institutions. However, this does not mean that she contrasts what is officially established and what is practiced in reality (as more or less intentional form of protest)³. Lived religion is rather related to individual living and experiencing, which might be situated within a certain religious institution, yet still must be adjusted to the believer on the level of everyday coherence. An effective practice which gives sense for an individual needs not to possess highly logical consistency –

³ More about lived religion as transgressing oppositions like official/nonofficial, popular/private conf. A. Niedźwiedz (2014).

although it must “work” for that individual. If we refer again to the research by Mariański and the Catholic example – a good Catholic who uses contraception might not consider himself a hypocrite, because in his way of understanding it is not a form of self-deception, but an individually designed system, which works. Likewise, McGuire gives the example of college-educated Mexican Americans, who perfectly know about the existence of bacteria and viruses, nonetheless, apart from modern medical solutions, they will not hesitate to seek the advice of *curandera*⁴ or say a proper prayer. They do not see any contradictions between contemporary medicine and sacred powers. Why they do that, why do they take pills, pray and undergo the rituals of *curandera*? The answer is simple, says McGuire: “because they work” (2009, p. 56). This approach – namely, adapting various practices with a certain dose of creativity – is characteristic not only to the 21st century, but it was also present in the Middle Ages and the Long Reformation (McGuire, 2009, p. 64).

Another thread, which McGuire undertakes in *Lived Religion* and other works, is related to corporeality and engaging the body in spiritual practices. She uses the term “embodied practices” in order to underline the fact that spiritual activities are deeply rooted in human bodies – through gestures, postures, movements, senses (2007, p. 188). Thus, she discredits the clear-cut division between the material and immaterial, considering spirituality to be “closely linked with material human bodies” (2009, p. 97). And McGuire means all physical human bodies, arthritic and athletic, healthy and malnourished, pregnant, suffering, engaged in all the biological and physiological processes. They matter to her, because lived religion is constituted by the practices people use to remember share, enact, adapt, create, and combine stories out of which they live. And it comes into being through the often-mundane practices people use to transform these meaningful interpretations into everyday action. Human bodies matter, because those practices – even interior ones, such as contemplation – involve people’s bodies, as well as their minds and spirits (2009, p. 98).

⁴ A traditional Native healer, in this case – a preacher, who performs various healing rituals.

In *Lived Religion* three categories of such embodied practices can be found, complemented by a plethora of examples: food and eating, work as a spiritual practice and making music together. McGuire recalls some of her respondents who were very keen gardeners and considered this activity as bringing certain spiritual discipline. The everyday ritual of watering the plants or weeding the flower bed was compared to participating in sacred ceremony or even identified with meditation. It is worth adding here that many Pagan rituals are very strongly embodied: dancing, chanting, namely raising the energy through various physical activities bear a great deal of importance. Wiccan *skyclad* practice (that is, being naked in the ritual circle) could also be named as an example.

Back to McGuire – religion is not a “unitary, organizationally defined, and relatively stable set of collective belief and practices” (2009, p. 186). This image, deeply rooted in Western thought of religion rarely does match the actual reality. Heterogeneity within the religious group or blending various practices became rather a norm than an exception. All the religions are syncretic in a way, as people continue to adapt to new circumstances and encounter new cultures and traditions. Even more – as social constructions (often contested), all the religious traditions cannot be neither unitary nor unchanging (2009, p. 200). This suits many contemporary Pagan religions perfectly, as they continue to syncretize and adapt rituals, practices and beliefs. This tendency was well summarized during one of the editors’ research among Traditional Wiccans: a female respondent, while comparing 21st century Wicca to the times of Gerald Gardner’s lifetime, said “we created it, we are creating this religion, it’s not that the religion is supposed to terrorize us. It is us who rule, not masters of old times, guru, first Wiccans who look down on us [and judge us]”. This adaptive and creative notion is crucial in the approach of lived religion.

Studying Paganisms as lived religion

One of the most (if not the most) profound study within what we call here a “living Paganism study paradigm” was done by Sarah M. Pike in the United States. She attended Neo-Pagan festivals, which are spiritual gatherings that attract followers of many Pagan traditions, but also people interested in the New Spirituality, New Age, animism, African and Native-American religions etc. The phenomenon of these gatherings is not limited to the US⁵, as they are organized also in the UK and Continental Europe. In Central and Eastern Europe the festivals, which can be called „New Age Fairs” (Jespers, 2013) or natural medicine and esoteric fairs, are of more popularity, but people from the Slavic Native Faith diaspora rarely do participate in such events. It is one of many observable differences between Pagan movements in the US/Western Europe and Central/Eastern Europe. Polish Native Faith followers (*rodzimowierstwo*, the largest Pagan religious current in Poland, with three officially registered religious organizations, Ciecieląg, 2016), usually distance themselves from the New Age, magic, esotericism and the occult.

Sarah M. Pike’s book is a holistic study of Pagan festivals: beliefs and practices, social interactions (both in-group relations and with social groups and agents outside festivals e. g. local communities, media, Christians), tools of trade and ritual accessories, sacred space, technical details of festival planning, decorated with lively narrated stories and fieldwork anecdotes. Among many reasons to study lived Paganisms, Pike names the one, that is of most importance for our approach presented here: “their newly invented self and community identities do not always match the ideals with which they describe themselves in books and other publications” (Pike, 2001, p. XX). It is the case of dissonance between the theological correctness level (which Paganism seems to be lacking or it is too much diverse) and lived religion.

An important element of performing a research into lived religion is studying not only religious rituals that are performed in public or may be otherwise a subject of the participant observation (cf. Grimes, 2014), but also

⁵ But they are rather central to the US (Pike, 2001, p. 231).

bringing other forms of ritualization into the research perspective. We can study the ways of weaving ritual behavior into the web of everyday life, daily responsibilities and family life. Personal rituals, performed occasionally or cyclically may be the subject of our interest, especially when their psychological meaning for the individual is concerned. Exploring the world of ritual music, costumes, dances, accessories (and preparations made for rituals) may for a nice study of the living aspect of rituals. It may be also an inquiry about the boundaries of the term “ritual”. Other forms of ritualization, like performing music, reading poetry, dancing (e.g. during Pagan fairs, festivals, camps, or courses) shall also be taken into consideration, as often they make the living part of the Pagan life, even if some of these practices are not concentrated on worship. The notion of studying Pagan “performance” may be useful in that context, as it has already been used to study those phenomena which are in some way liminal, situated somewhere in between the ritual and play, between the sacred and the profane (Grimes, 2012).

Also informant-produced images and photo-interviews may be very useful tools in studying lived religion, especially from the emic perspective. Photos taken by respondents may invite “researchers into spaces it was difficult to enter physically themselves” (Pink, 2007, p. 91). The photo-interviews may follow such tasks and provide valuable data. Just to name an example: personal space, with religious or spiritual features in respondents’ homes, neighborhoods, workplaces may form a focus of such study. The interviews focused on such photos may reveal the important level of meaning, as the photo itself can be interpreted in many different ways. Respondent’s interpretation enriches the research with meaningful narratives – and also in the analysis it is worth to pay attention to which features and elements were emphasized in the narration, and which omitted or neglected.

Studying lived religion may be (and often is) a study of what is commonly known as the everyday life. So it may be study from the sociology of the everyday perspective. The problem with studying the everyday is that the term itself is “multi-faceted, its borders are blurred” (Kędzierzawski, 2009, p. 7). What is the “everyday” life? Is an every-Sunday experience strong enough

to talk about the everyday? Is every-month perspective still in the scope of the everyday? But studying lived religion is not only oriented towards the everyday, but it is about people who are in the everyday, so the focus here could be on “the way of being”, which generally can be defined as “a way of understanding and experiencing the World on the level of meaning” (Pawluczuk, 2014, p. 139). The way of being is not a constant feature of the subject, as it can change as the meaning is transformed – a golden figure of a deity is something different for a person praying at the temple and for a gold dealer (Pawluczuk, 2014, p. 141). The concept of studying lived religion may be therefore an attempt of encompassing many various modes of being and ways of perceiving reality in a research perspective. However, there is an important shift in the perspective, from theoretical, sociological or philosophical reflection on the everyday and ways of being, to empirical studies and examining the life just-as-it-is – which remains to be the core of lived religion. It can be a study started from emic data, fieldwork, observation, interviews, and furtherly including the etic perspective, investigating which religious beliefs are maintained, reconstructed, reinvented or newly born. With this book we invite our Readers into the New World of research possibilities, which we will hopefully reach, by walking, alongside our Pagan respondents, on the Old Ways.

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